

## Book Review

### Between Abjection and the Abject

Abjection and Representation: An Exploration of Abjection in the Visual Arts, Film and Literature , 'by Rina Arya, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 2014.

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According to the author, Rina Arya, the book emerged as a response to and an attempt to address the low critical capacity among some of her art students working on topics relating to disgust, or abjection (p. viii-x, see also 189). In particular, their difficulties in following the discussion or relating theory and practice. One of the reasons for this, the author believes, was their lack of sufficient knowledge of psychoanalysis and this is precisely why she set out to write this book, having a clear audience in mind. Although Julia Kristeva is one of the most prominent names in the study of the abject and abjection (specifically in *Powers of Horror*), which has often been recommended to students, her strong Lacanian base may make it difficult to adequately understand Kristeva's proposal. Thus, the first chapter devotes itself to writing a script of 'how to read *Powers of Horror*, considering Lacanian psychoanalysis as the main influence.'



The introduction offers several corrections to the common misinterpretations about the term *abject*. The most important and most repeated refers to the reduction of the abject to abjection, where a false synonymy is often constructed to the term disgust. The author shows that the English term abjection does not carry the same weight as the French homonym, and that this must be taken into account in any analysis, especially granted the dominant influence of Georges Bataille in the thought of Julia Kristeva. Even in the first paragraph of the introduction, Rina Arya calls to the fore the works of artists who have explored the abject (*Pee Body*, by Kiki Smith); this feature is repeated throughout the remainder of the book. However, there is no commentary offered on the art works and sadly, the more than 200 pages of the book lack any image, or even a list of art works. This means that the book can become frustrating for readers with a greater interest in theorizing about abject/ion and less prior knowledge within the field of arts,



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as they may constantly need to search for additional information and images of the artworks during their reading. This is also visible in the lack of further comments (or, even notes) about the artworks mentioned as opposed to the effort made to explain theorists of other areas, e.g. Marcel Mauss, Emile Durkheim, Victor Turner, and Arnold Van Gennep. Since the author invests a reasonable effort to introduce theorists outside the arts to art students, it would have been plausible to include similar presentations of works of art for students outside the field of the arts.

In the introduction, the author argues that there is a strong indication for the relations of similarity between the abject and the *Other* – a similarity of particular interest for the students of anthropology. For these students, the attempted recovering of Georges Bataille, in contrast to the dominant role afforded to Kristeva, may be especially valuable. Consequently, the author's objective in chapter one is to summarize, and provide the know-how for reading Julia Kristeva. Aware of the art students' limitations in psychoanalysis (p. vii), it also offers a brief review of Lacan and Freud, especially in the replacement of the father for the mother as the main constituent in the image of the formation of identity. But the author goes beyond and even recovers the critiques of Kristeva, thus offering a basis for critical thinking. The second chapter then develops a perspective on the relations between the constructions of the abject and borders. If in the first chapter the abject is neither subject nor object, in the second, the abject transgresses any frontier limitation that one may try to establish. While in the first chapter priority is given to the space and construction of the individual by the abject, in the second, one moves towards the presence of the abject on a more collective, social scale. Rina Arya attempts here to synthesize the work of Mary Douglas on 'the matter out of place' with the work of Kristeva. Roughly, there is a leap from the 'physical body' of the individual, presented in chapter one, to the 'social body' of culture, and to the way in which the social, as well as the biological, shapes our perceptions and actions. The focus that Douglas brings to the discussion points to the question of cleanliness and purity as constitutive to the formation of these boundaries. The third chapter goes on to recover the perceptions about social bodies, through the work of Georges Bataille, and his writings on abject/ion, published post-mortem. The author has a rather conservative view of social organization in Hinduism, referring to the perceptions that have been consecrated by such names as Louis Dumont. These notions are closely bound up with rather rigid and hierarchical structures that refer mainly to values of purity and impurity. These perceptions have already been reviewed by others, such as Steven Vertovec's works in presenting the reconstructions of the 'caste system' in contexts of Indian diasporas, and is also visible in the analyses included in works organized by Ravindra S. Khare (as seen in *Caste, Hierarchy, and Individualism: Indian Critiques of Louis Dumont's Contributions*). This chapter, together with the previous one, are those that enable the most dialogue with some anthropological approaches.

The 'representation,' promised in the title of the book, enters only in chapter four, where Rina Arya reviews – even though she tries to reject the term of 'representation' (pp. 84-85) – artistic objects concerning the abject, within the visual arts. It is from this chapter onwards that the absence of images becomes critical, as in the events described on page 91 and beyond, when the author seeks to describe the construction of a series of real size dolls made by Hans Bellmer. These points would be better developed if some of the photographs were available and included in the book.

The multitude of notes included in this chapter mitigates the situation. It is possible that the images have not been inserted to avoid possible triggers in the reaction of readers (see note 4 of chapter 4, the beginning of page 114, see also 195) or some issue involving copyright. It is in this chapter that the first male artist, Hans Bellmer, is mentioned. Replacing the high praise for the 'transgression capabilities' of the female artists who had been cited so far, there is the inclusion of the first moral-psychological judgement of an artist. This seems like a double standard. About Bellmer (pp. 91-92):

All these scenes are deeply disturbing and convey the sinister, paedophilic and violent quality of his images that are suggestive of rape scenes. [...] His work can be explained by a lifelong motivation to liberate himself from the dictates of 'adult' behaviour and from certain constraining powers in his life, such as his overpowering father and prevailing fascist ideals [note omitted] as well as an overwhelming need to release his instincts and explore his perverted misogyny [note omitted]. [...] However, through the eyes of a grown man, his images instead conjure up psychosexual disturbance and the nightmarish. His erotomania for his pubescent dolls may be regarded by many as distasteful, as was his need to articulate polymorphous perversity [note omitted].

And about Kiki Smith (pp. 87-88):

One artist who is preoccupied with embodiment is Kiki Smith. She creates sculptures that portray human corporeality (often through the excretory function), the loss of self, decay and the abject state of the body that is drawn into a cycle of replenishment and decay. They 'are not the kind of bodies and objects we are accustomed to, not the finished, polished desiring machines produced by modern technology or reproduced on glossy paper or celluloid' [...] Christine Ross offers the descriptor 'skinned' with reference to the Virgin Mary (1993), but the term is more widely applicable for describing the general appearance of Smith's works. [...] Another phrase that comes to mind when thinking about Smith's work, as articulated by Catherine Lampert, is the 'strongly visceral and unnerving presence' [...]. What makes Smith's work one of the most apt examples of abjection is that she exposes the vulnerability of the subject that is in a state of corporeal turmoil. This manifests itself in the overflow of substances, such as bodily fluids. [...] Smith features bodies in the process of excretion of some kind. And so, not only are we forced to confront excreta but also the bodily function. [...] The placement and position of the figures that are crouching down and lying down add weight to this reading. [...] The emphasis on the bodily and the questions about identity that abjection gives rise to mean that abjection is still a pervasive theme in contemporary art today.

Chapter four is flooded with reflections on the potential (and observed) reactions of the viewing public to some works that utilize the abject/ion. Given the centrality of the discussion in the second half of the chapter on viewers (from a rather paternalistic perspective, as when the author exclaims (p. 101): 'For many of the artworks discussed in this chapter it is difficult for us to speak about their affective qualities. [...] They may cause feelings in the viewer of fear, horror and disgust, all of which make critical detachment impossible'. Combined with the aforementioned lack of images of any of the works cited, this might indicate an effort to try to impair the reader from effectively becoming a viewer and instead suggesting what he or she is to observe in the first place.

As in the third chapter, Bataille is the author who receives most attention in the fifth chapter. His perceptions about the *formless* are thoroughly presented to the reader, while a dialogue is developed with other contemporary authors. According to Rina Arya (p. 120): 'Form is maintained when figure can be discerned from ground, and subject from object, and so the formless implies the collapse of the two states.' The final parts (125 and *passim*), seeks to demonstrate the relations to and possible problems of these comparisons between Bataille's formless and Kristeva's abject. The proposal is: by establishing what is not abject, the reader understands what the abject may be. Similar situations had already occurred in other chapters (Kant's *sublime*, p. 6, *disgust*, p. 33, etc.). The chapter concludes by an attempt to respond to the criticisms made of the limitations of Kristeva's proposal for the term abject, by injecting 'too much meaning' into its composition. The critics suggest, in short, that in presenting the concept of formless, Bataille did not make such a slip. To Kristeva's critics, Bataille's concept of 'formless' is a more versatile concept than Kristeva's 'abject'. Rina Arya returns to the analysis of impacts and effects on the viewers in chapter six (p. 133). Only this time, she dedicates the chapter to cinematographic productions, focusing in particular on reviews of films with monsters, promising to recover the discussion of the social abject (p. 143 and *passim*). But then, she sacrifices the proposal in favour of prioritizing (again) the discussion about the viewers at the expense of the producer or even the work (action that will be repeated in the next chapter also, starting on page 164). The author also promises to revise Barbara Creed's critique (p. 143 and *passim*) on the feminization of monstrosity, but the final argument (pp. 152-155) is not persuasive. If chapter six is not able to maintain the level of the previous chapters, chapter seven, in dealing with the relations between abject/ion and literature, recovers the announced incestuousity between the symbolic and the semiotic (see also pp. 20-21), allowing the book to finish on a good note. While chapter six can be described as a well-organized *series of movie reviews*, in chapter seven, we can see considerations drawn upon writers of literature. And it allows for the carrying out of analyses on the influences, desires, and even personal histories of the authors. Comparable deeper analyses were not the case in the previous chapter.

Finishing *Abjection and Representation*, we are left with the feeling that the 'abject' for the author refers to the non-belonging from any side, and the full capacity of transposition from one side to the other of the borders. The abject leaps from the condition of non-object and non-subject (p. 4) to a condition of non-belonging while maintaining a dual belonging (p. 133, 190). The abject is presented as the climax of transgression. That is why it so often simultaneously incites excitement and repulsion in the viewer (p. 5). Paradoxically, the author has succeeded in making the analysis of the abject even more

abject (as in marginalized) than the abject itself. There is a continuing effort to break out of the analysis of the abject and focus entirely on the analysis of the art consumer's perspective (art which is marked by abject discourse). We could even say that the author capitalized on and sold the abject by barricading it on the banks. An abject no longer abject. And hence, it becomes even more abject if compared to the *original* abject. This can be a natural consequence of this type of comparative approach.

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